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By H. Buxton Forman

London - Macmillan & Co., Limited

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Reprinted from the *Bulletin and Review of the Keats-Shelley Memorial Rome*  
edited by Sir Rennell Rodd and H. Nelson Gay. No. 2.

Edition strictly limited to fifty copies of which ten have been printed on  
Fabriano hand-made paper.

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## **How Shelley approached the Ode to the West Wind**

**By H. Buxton Forman**

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In the fourth volume of Mary Shelley's first collected edition of her husband's poetry, issued in 1839, she printed a group of fragments of which the tenth is given as follows: —

What art thou, Presumptuous, who profanest  
The wreath to mighty poets only due?  
Even whilst like a forgotten moon thou wanest,  
Touch not those leaves which for the eternal few,  
Who wander o'er the paradise of fame,  
In sacred dedication ever grew:  
One of the crowd thou art without a name.  
Ah, friend, 'tis the false laurel that I wear;  
Bright though it seem, it is not the same  
As that which bound Milton's immortal hair;  
Its dew is poison and the hopes that quicken  
Under its chilling shade, though seeming fair,  
Are flowers which die almost before they sicken.

The eleventh fragment in this same group is a very curious mixture, partly derived by Mary from the same obscure source as the tenth, but mainly from some other source. It reads thus: —

When soft winds and sunny skies  
With the green earth harmonize,  
And the young and dewy dawn,  
Bold as an unhunted fawn,  
Up the windless heaven is gone —  
Laugh — for ambushed in the day,  
Clouds and whirlwinds watch their prey.  
And that I walk thus proudly crowned withal  
Is that 'tis my distinction; if I fall,  
I shall not weep out of the vital day.  
To-morrow dust, nor wear a dull decay.

It is open to question whether one so keen as Mary, and with such an intimate knowledge of Shelley's mind and methods, ever meant to give the first seven lines and the last four as a continuous fragment. Their appearance thus in her first edition of 1839 was quite likely to have been due to some misconception on the part of the printers; and her failure to divide the fragment into two may well have been a mere mechanical accident. Be that as it may, she appears to have seen in that very year the incongruity of the component parts as printed; and, when she issued her second collected edition, the last four lines were not given at all, either with the first seven or elsewhere. She thus abandoned what turns out to be by far the more important of the two incongruous parts of her ostensibly continuous fragment No. XI as it first appeared in print. The gracious imagery and lovely cadence of the seven lines which did duty for the eleven, from the second edition of 1839 onwards, give them, obviously, far more beauty to justify a separate existence than the abandoned four lines can boast; but it is not as a separate fragment that the four lines are to be kept among our treasures with the information now forthcoming as to the way in which they were tortured and corrupted out of their true meaning and place. So far as Mary Shelley is concerned those four lines were



dead and buried. In the Shelley revival of which Rossetti's two-volume edition of 1870 is the most important symbol, the four lines had no place. It was after the issue of that invaluable contribution to Shelley literature that I was bitten with the desire, mainly on textual grounds, to make an edition with a different scheme; and, while ransacking for material all editions of repute, I came upon those four tortured lines in Mary's first collected edition. In 1877, therefore, I restored them as a separate fragment, simply headed *Couplets*, to the mass of Shelley's authentic work; and Rossetti, in 1878, placed them in his three-volume edition at the end of Mary's fragment No. X of 1839 (No. XXIV of 1852) — the fragment beginning «What art thou» — shrewdly surmising that they belonged to it, and raising the question whether the word weep was not a mistranscription for creep. As the reader will presently see, both surmises were well founded.

The «What art thou» fragment had been printed in my edition with the heading *Fragment of Terza Rima: False Laurels and True*, apparently to emphasize my belief that the lines were not, as sometimes supposed, an incomplete sonnet.

Professor Dowden (Globe edition, 1890, p. 589) did not accept the union of the two fragments, perhaps for the same reason that influenced me in 1892, when issuing the Aldine edition, to-wit, that two consecutive couplets could form no part of a poem in *terza rima*, though he rejected the words *of terza rima* when adopting my title.

Professor Woodberry (Centenary edition, 1892, Vol. IV) also divorced the two fragments connected by Rossetti, placing one at page 86, headed *Laurel*, and the other at page 106, headed *Crowned*.

Mr. Hutchinson (Oxford Shelley, 1904, pp. 654-5) likewise accepts the divorce, printing the two couplets without distinctive title beyond their own first line, and giving as *The false Laurel and the*

*True*, after three other (unconnected) fragments, the thirteen lines which Professor Woodberry simply calls *Laurel*.

Mr. Locock, in his highly reputable edition of 1911 (Vol. II, pp. 267-8) reverts to the Rossetti arrangement so far as order is concerned, but gives to the thirteen lines the title of *Laurels* and to the two couplets none beyond the wording of their first line.

Not one of the five of us has had the courage to adopt Rossetti's beautiful textual suggestion, *creep* for *weep*; but that it is the right reading will presently be seen. I do not blame our five worthy selves for not departing from a sound if ultra-conservative principle, even though the temptation was so great as in the present case. Still less would I venture to criticize my revered friend for his admirable abstinence in keeping his text as he found it, while suggesting a better reading, and merely innovating so far as to join the two fragments frankly and print them as one.

All the time that this was going on, there was the divine poet turning over and over in his grave, so to speak, and shuddering at the mess his widow had stumbled into in consequence of his untidy drafting, and, latterly, wondering why Dr. Garnett did not put the whole thing on a proper footing, as he could have done if he had been minded to face the troubled source of Mary's two fragments, exorcise the demon of obscure confusion, and own to the world that, in one of the poet's note books forming the priceless gift by which Sir Percy and Lady Shelley had rewarded his friendship and substantial literary services, lay the key to the mystery, which key, indeed, he had literally had in his hand at Boscombe before he published his *Relics of Shelley* in 1862. The word *priceless* used above is of course purely figurative, because, at all events for the present, the *price* of the three note books has been adjudged to be the round three thousand pounds paid by Mr. W. K. Bixby,

plus commission, when the library of Dr. Garnett was sold and the treasure in question, bought for that generous collector, passed from this side of the Atlantic to the other. The sale took place on December 6, 1906; and after that event there was an anxious time during which one of my chief preoccupations was whether, and if so when, those note books (which I never saw till they were at Messrs. Sotheby, Wilkinson and Hodge's auction rooms, and of the possession of which by Dr. Garnett very few persons were aware), would find their way back to the land of Shelley's birth. After the lapse, to be precise, of two years and nine months, the books did find their way back to London; and by the beginning of October 1909 they were, through the kindness of Mr. Bixby, undergoing a scrupulous examination by me, with a view to the diffusion of the results among the five hundred or so members of the Bibliophile Society of Boston.

Some account of the contents of the note books was given in the briefest practicable manner in the auctioneer's catalogue of the Garnett sale; and it was no less an authority than Mr. Rossetti himself who prepared the few relative pages of the catalogue. When the books were in my custody I furnished the Treasurer of the Bibliophile Society with a much fuller, but still brief, account of each volume, with examples of the drafts etc. which they contain; and that account was circulated among the « Bibliophiles » in the Society's ninth year book, in 1910. In 1911 the whole results were set out in three of those luxuriously printed volumes for which the Bibliophile Society is renowned, and those volumes duly passed into the hands of the members, while a more restricted issue was printed for Mr. Bixby's own distribution as gifts.

One of the most protracted, arduous, and at the same time stimulating chapters in my dealings with the note books was the

examination of five pages in the earliest of them on which is written in pencil the draft of the first three stanzas of the Ode to the West Wind; and one of the most interesting incidents was the interpretation of the three pages on which the poet had been in labour with some quite regularly composed *terza rima* verses evidencing an unusually serious attack of the spleen. It was from these pages that Mary got, and set out with a reasonable degree of accuracy for 1839, the thirteen lines «What art thou» etc. and with an unreasonable degree of inaccuracy, even for 1839, the two couplets which have since undergone the vicissitudes related in this paper. The composition left unfinished on these three pages was conceived as a dialogue, whether between the poet and a personal friend or between two separate voices of the poet's own soul, who shall say? That there are two interlocutors actual or spiritual has been evident to most of Shelley's editors even from the thirteen lines, which have sometimes been set out accordingly with quotation marks.

There is no doubt that the indifference to Shelley's poetic merits evinced by his countrymen caused him far more chagrin than their attacks upon his political attitude or even his morals; and it was not a matter for much surprise to find him contemplating in the autumn of 1819 a poem in which his feelings on the question should be set forth with some pique. Hence, when I lighted (in the first note book) upon an abortive opening within a few leaves of the draft of the Ode to the West Wind, conceived thus: —

And what art thou presumptuous boy who wearest  
The bays to mighty poets only due?  
The ivy tresses of Apollo's fairest  
Prophaning...

when I read on and found myself face to face with the matrix of those thirteen lines and those two couplets the distortion of which

lies at his widow's door, I felt such exhilaration as a boy of nearly seventy years may be excused for feeling « when a new planet swims into his ken » after he has been a « watcher of the sky » for nearly forty years. Here at length was Shelley protesting: here also was the supreme lyrist beginning to breathe the atmosphere of that divine ode, the progress of which cleared his soul of all taint of bitterness and told the world not only how solemnly he could sweep the lyre, but also how he could devise, shape, and castigate a new immortal song, and nourish it with a clear hope for his own poetry's future and the future of man; and finally how he could abide in patience the ultimate judgment of his race.

For full details of Shelley's fit of spleen and his struggle with a stubborn language and a stubborn metre, the curious must endeavour to consult a copy of the private book of the Bibliophile Society. It will suffice here to set out the *terza rima* verses evolved with one or two more rejected passages. Here are the verses in their last stage of development: —

And what art thou presumptuous who profanest  
The wreath to mighty Poets only due?  
Even whilst, like a forgotten name thou wanest  
Touch not those leaves which for the eternal few  
Who wander o'er the Paradise of fame  
In sacred dedication ever grew —  
One of the crowd thou art, — without a name  
Ah friend 'tis the false laurel which I wear  
And though it seem like it is not the same  
As that which bound Milton's immortal hair  
Its dew is poison, and the hopes which quicken  
Under its chilling shade, though seeming fair  
Are flowers which die almost before they sicken  
And that I walk thus proudly crowned withal  
Is that I know it may be thunderstricken  
And this is my distinction, if I fall

I shall not creep out of the vital day  
To common dust nor wear a common pall  
But as my hopes were fire, so my decay  
Shall be as ashes covering them. Oh, Earth  
Oh friends, if when my                      has ebbed away  
One spark be unextinguished of that hearth  
Kindled in...

The most significant group of rejected readings offers the following alternatives after *thunderstricken*: —

And this is my distinction, if I fall  
It may not be ingloriously  
That I stand forth  
From the rest, huddled into the wide grave  
Not to be huddled into the wide pit  
Under the  
I will not crawl out of this vital air  
Dear friend  
If any spark be unextinguished there  
When I am dead  
If when this mortal [                      ] has ebbed away  
One spark be unextinguished, do thou  
Let spare...

A comparison of the first thirteen lines of the *terza rima* with the thirteen composing Mary's Fragment No. X shows that, apart from the omission of the initial *And*, there are but four misreadings, namely, (1) *moon* for *name* in line 3, (2) *that* for *which* in line 8, (3) *Bright though it seem it* for *And though it seem like it* in line 9, (4) *that* for *which* in line 11, and of these the introduction of the wholly unauthorized *Bright* is the only really serious matter. Of the two couplets, it will be seen, line 1 is simply line 14 of the *terza rima* draft, line 2 is made up from lines 15 and 16 of the same, line 3 is line 17, but with the misreading *weep* for *creep*, and line 4 is a jumble of readings and misreadings from lines 18



and 19. In the draft lines 14 to 16 are consecutively written at the foot of one page and the head of the next, without any correction; and it is highly curious that the striking rhyme *sicken* and *thunderstricken* did not arrest Mary's attention and stop her couplet-making to such ruinous result as we have been discussing.

To return to the extraordinary interest of the abandoned sketch now at last clearly set out — there can, I submit, be no possible question that what is adumbrated is the magnificent appeal to the West Wind: —

Scatter as from an unextinguished hearth  
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!  
Be through my lips to unawakened earth  
The trumpet of a prophecy.

By what gradations the hankering after the appreciation of folk then living passed and gave place to a far nobler and more characteristic frame of mind, there can obviously be no certainty. Shelley's better judgment of course taught him two things — first that the attitude of the *terza rima* screed was unworthy of him if not essentially anti-poetic, and secondly that the metre itself, as usually employed, was unsuitable and much too conducive to longwindedness for a passionate appeal to futurity.

Among my memoranda of work connected with the examination of that battered, tattered, water-stained note book in which the *terza rima* study and the Ode to the West Wind both figure, I have found one which I had mislaid when finally setting out the results of my work. It does not affect in any way the text or variations of either composition; but it suggests a very strange phase in the passage from one frame of mind to the other.

With Shelley's habit of sketching and scribbling trees, pools, faces, and at times figures, in the intervals of composition, those

who have handled his note books are well acquainted. Now on the page of the drafted *terza rima* with which we have just been dealing — the page where the rejected utterances about the « wide grave » and the « wide pit » occur — there is mixed up with the draftings about ashes and the unextinguished spark what seems to be a facial illustration of the word *grave*; it is a rocky, ghastly, savage face, recalling in a rough way the abject semi-human giants of George Cruikshank. It suggests a personification of the man-eating grave; and over the top of the head Shelley has scrawled in pencil (the top of the head is itself pencilled, though the horrible face is done in ink) the words *homo gravis*, and then a capital H, as if he was about to repeat *Homo* with a capital. Higher up, over the words *To common dust*, he has pencilled *Je suis un homme grave* and then between that and *homo gravis* the word *Un* as if he would have repeated the last three of the five French words with an initial capital. Surely this levity has some significance — there must have been something in the poet's mind to set his hands working in that way; and it seems to me that the alloy of annoyance had flown « off in fume » and left the gold of his mind free for any mood — even for a rather poor joke against the poet's own attack of peevishness.

It has been the privilege of a not over appreciative public ever since the year 1820 to know from Shelley himself the place and the material circumstances in which the Ode to the West Wind was « conceived and chiefly written ». That glorious event in the history of English lyric poesy took place « in a wood that skirts the Arno, near Florence, and on a day when that tempestuous wind, whose temperature is at once mild and animating, was collecting the vapours which pour down the autumnal rains ». Thither came the poet bearing that weather-beaten little note book with him,



having, it may be assumed, thrown off his rare splenetic mood, and condemned *terza rima* (in its integrity) as a metre for the embodiment of the invocation and appeal with which his heart and soul were teeming. It was on that day, in all likelihood, that a fair proportion of the damage suffered by the honoured note book was done; for the poet records that the autumnal rains began as he had foreseen, «at sunset with a violent tempest of hail and rain, attended by that magnificent thunder and lightning peculiar to the Cisalpine regions».

Under that day's varied inspirations and with a mind attuned to noble and soaring thoughts the West Wind was made his ambassador, accredited to the later generations of mankind, to bear all messages which the poet had sought to deliver to the indifferent generation of his own day, and above all things the noble minor lessons in human politics taught in *The Mask of Anarchy*, as well as the stupendously schemed and accomplished song of man's regeneration which the world now knows as *Prometheus Unbound*.

It was in the setting of that day's thoughts to one of the most majestic lyric movements ever devised that Shelley found out what to do with the stubborn *terza rima*. His thoughts needed but seventy lines of five-foot iambics to enshrine them; and of that number of lines he made five uniform stanzas. Each stanza consists of fourteen lines — the main body, twelve lines, composed with the customarily arranged five rhyme-sounds, whereof the fifth is echoed in the closing couplet. Three of these cunningly wrought stanzas occupy in the drafting, as already stated, five pages of the note book, and such of the curious as can must refer for details to the printed book of the Bibliophile Society to which I have gladly devoted the best part of my time for two years. But there are one or two lines, rejected by

the poet on technical grounds as the Ode progressed, which I cannot forbear to quote, as (III, 3): —

Lulled by the silence of his crystal streams,

which ultimately gave place to

Lulled by the coil of his crystalline streams,

and (I, 12): —

The atmospheree investing plain and hill,

which gave place to

With living hues and odours plain and hill.

To find a draft of the last two stanzas of the Ode in a shape as difficult to unravel as the first three and as rich in evidence (when unravelled) of that infinite capacity for taking trouble and rising by gradations into the upper regions of song would be a great satisfaction; but at present I do not know whether the stanzas exist in that stage in some other note book or not. One thing I do know — that I have seen somewhere at some time, but where or when has not remained in my memory, a holograph manuscript of the Ode or part of it from which one line got pigeon-holed in my brain, the last line of the Ode — and a more striking lesson in transformation it would indeed be difficult to find. In the manuscript of which I speak Shelley had written the closing sentence, not as a question, but as a dogmatic assertion thus: —

O Wind,

When Winter comes Spring lags not far behind.

This is a most curious instance of the liability of poetic thought to get itself set down in mere intellectual terms. The juxtaposition

of the three monosyllables, *comes*, *spring* and *lags* would be intolerable to the singer working hand in hand with the thinker in Shelley's soul; and when Shelley substituted for that phraseology the exquisite

O Wind,

If Winter comes, can spring be far behind? —

the singer sang at his best, and if the thinker spent much thought on the subtly beautiful transformation, the drift of it would have been that the pathos, the lassitude supervening on so splendid and passionate an outburst, was infinitely more effective in the singer's tremulous question than in the thinker's dogmatic assertion.

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